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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses useful techniques for the presentation of college courses on television, based on the author's year-long programming of television courses in American history. Suggestions include comments on program organization, effective use of visual aids, pacing the lecture, methods of on-camera relaxation, and working with the program set and director. (EW)

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Working on the Hot Side of the Lights: Several Techniques for Effective Television Instruction

Thomas M. Preisser

Since its inception in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, commercial television has fundamentally altered American culture. It has become so much a part of our lives that most of us can hardly imagine a time when it didn't exist. Educational television has developed much more slowly; despite a number of excellent programs such as those offered on Sunrise Semester, it has remained an underutilized resource. However, the increasingly widespread availability of recording equipment may herald a pedagogical change of the sort that has overtaken Sinclair Community College in recent years.

A few years ago the Director of Sinclair College's television programming operation (TV Sinclair) approached me with a proposal: how would I like to present an American history course on television? The offer intrigued as well as flattered me. I knew a little about our college television component; the director, Professor Joseph LaBriola and I were personal friends, and I had watched his operation grow since its inception in the Winter of 1980. TV Sinclair ran two courses each quarter during the academic year on channel 7, Dayton's local CBS affiliate. Having seen a few of our programs, I was impressed by the quality of the operation. I soon agreed to tape the first of our three course sequence in American history as soon as it could be prepared. After eight years of teaching history and

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political science in a traditional classroom setting at Sinclair, the novelty of the thing appealed strongly. Besides, eleven thirty minute presentations just didn't seem that difficult.

A year and a half elapsed as I taped all three courses in the series. I realize that after thirty-three half-hour programs I'm not an expert, but I am a veteran. Perhaps some of what I learned during those months will prove helpful to those preparing to tape their initial program.

I think it's essential to familiarize yourself with the operation before you begin to produce tapes. Visit the studio, talk with the producer and director, look at the equipment, and above all, watch someone else tape several programs. Make a note of what works and what doesn't and identify those elements that could enhance the quality of your presentation; that's time well spent.

Set aside some time to analyze your course objectives before you begin to write your scripts. I found it useful to decide on the topics of all of the programs before I began to write the first one and to settle on two or three themes that would serve to unify the material. Advance preparation of this sort should result in a more tightly-knit, logically organized set of tapes.

Visual aids play a crucial role in an effective college course television program. Before you begin taping, give some thought to the kinds of visual material you intend to use. Although slides, diagrams, maps, charts, and outlines perform the invaluable function

of breaking the monotony of watching the same person on camera for a half hour, you must attempt to form an image of what they will look like on a television screen. When you show slides, choose them carefully; a portrait of Tecumseh has much greater impact than a cluttered scene of Daniel Boone leading a group of settlers through the Cumberland Gap. Overly-detailed maps seem just about useless, along with graphs and charts with symbols so small that the viewer can't begin to decipher them. One final point involving visuals in a different context: try moving your head and arms and, if possible, varying your position during your presentation. You may find that a more interesting and dynamic program will result.

Next, and certainly most difficult of all the aspects of television course programming, you must find a way to relax during your presentations. That's hard to do, but I don't think it's beyond anyone s reach. Let me suggest several techniques which I found useful. First, prepare a highly detailed script, or outline, and rehearse it thoroughly before your lecture. I've watched programs in which the instructor relied on a one page script, and it just doesn't work. My scripts, which varied in length from eight to ten pages, weren't intended to be read verbatim but they did tell me exactly what I had to cover. Incidentally, you'll discover the indispensability of a detailed script when you realize the necessity of showing the production crew precisely where you want your slides, charts, and outlines inserted. You should mark those areas in your script where

you can extemporize, if necessary, and prepare yourself to do so if the need arises.

A second way of warding off the jitters involves the use of psychology. One of my favorite techniques consists of a reminder that "it doesn't really make any difference." When the tension starts to build, I think back to a classic line out of an old Mary Tyler Moore show. Hot on the trail of success in the television broadcasting profession, Mary had produced a dismal program that failed either to entertain or to enlighten her audience. Trying to console her, Lou Grant, her boss, resorted to psychology: "Mary, it's not important in the scheme of things; in forty years you'll be dead and no one will care one way or another." Lou made the essential point: getting it right isn't a life or death matter. His comment also reminds me of the need to retain a sense of humor in an intense environment.

A third technique of relaxing involves recalling the nature of your assignment. A botched line here, a pause or a mispronounced word there are healthy signs of spontaneity, and your presentation ought to appear as spontaneous as possible. Members of the Royal Shakespeare Company can deliver a series of lines without a miss while charming their audiences; attempts on our part to deliver flawless, error-free lectures commonly emerge as flat, dull, sterile performances.

Finally, one of my favorite ways of relaxing in front of a camera involves diverting my attention away from me and to the material. For many viewers, watching your program is the only exposure they'll ever

have to history, or business law, or stress management at the college level. You must find a way to convince them that no other college course approaches yours in importance and degree of interest. If you're successful, you may see them in the flesh some day. Don't shy away from projecting a degree of emotional as well as intellectual involvement in your presentations. Lively anecdotal and illustrative material abounds in every discipline; find it and use it. Express your feelings, but don't lose control of your emotions. I can't ever talk about the slave Sojurner Truth's two young daughters being taken from her forever, or about the imprisonment of Eugene Debs during the Pullman Strike, without a feeling and expressing a sense of rage. Emotion brings life to a television lecture; if uncontrolled, however, it can ruin an otherwise capable presentation.

Another prime requisite for good lectures on television rests in developing a sense of timing and pace. Listen to yourself as you talk; don't fall into the trap, engendered by nervousness, of speaking so rapidly you become unintelligible. The pressure of the moment proved impossible for me to deflect entirely, and I found that I ordinarily covered from ten to twenty percent more material in taping than I did in rehearsal. Thus, it proved essential for me to have extra material prepared that I could discuss in an emergency. I also quickly discovered the impossibility of defining or discussing recondite terms and subjects without a careful outline to follow. You can't simply insert the words "parity-define," or "McCulloch v.

Maryland-discuss implied powers doctrine" and expect to pull it off. Spontaneity is the goal toward which you should strive, not paralysis.

Good programs don't result without capable directors. Ask your director periodically for ways in which your performance can be enhanced, and don't become overly defensive when he or she suggests areas for improvement. I don't think you should question your director if he or she asks for a re-take; remember that that person bears responsibility for the final product. Work on retaining a sense of perspective when things go wrong, as they occasionally will. When your director cues you that camera two is live and you see the red light burning on camera one, don't go to pieces; you'll find that two or three different problems will surface soon after you've resolved that one.

The preceding paragraph doesn't mean that you must relinquish control over conditions on the set. Having spent eleven or twelve hours researching, outlining, writing, typing, obtaining visual aids for, and rehearsing each script, I refused to let someone else spoil my lecture. High school students ran our camera and sound equipment, and I soon realized they loved to laugh softly, joke, and talk to each other while I lectured. That stopped in time, but not until, in a gradually escalating series of pleas and comments, I threatened to walk off the set and not return. Also, although initially I couldn't work with visitors on the set, I gradually became accustomed to their presence. It's your program, too, and you have the right to control those variables which affect your presentation.

The central lessons of a year's television programming can be quickly summarized. Careful, thoughtful preparation, accompanied by a well-organized, detailed script form the core of a successful program. You should have a thorough knowledge of your discipline; you'll run beyond your script and be forced to improvise more than once. Rehearse your material diligently, give your viewers a sense of how strongly you feel about your subject, and have fun -- you'll have earned it.

-- Thomas M. Preisser